

ON THE
SCIENCE OF EASY CHAIRS

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ON POSTURE

AND ITS INDICATIONS

Reprinted from "THE LANCET," July 2, 1892.

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ON
THE SCIENCE OF EASY CHAIRS.

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THERE is a reason for everything, if we can only find it out, but it is sometimes very hard to discover the reasons of even the very simplest things. Every one who has travelled much, and even those who have merely looked through books of travels, must have been struck by the variety of attitudes assumed by the people of different countries. The Hindoo sits down on the ground with his knees drawn up close to his body, so that his chin will almost rest upon them; the Turk squats down cross-legged; the European sits on a chair; while the American often raises his legs to a level with his head. Nor are the postures assumed by the same people under varying circumstances less diverse. Climate or season, for example, will cause considerable alteration in the posture assumed, as was well shown by Alma Tadema, in his pictures of the four seasons exhibited in the Academy a year ago. In his representation of summer he painted a woman leaning backwards on a ledge, with one leg loosely hanging down, while the other was drawn up so that the foot was on a level with the body. In the picture of Winter, on the other hand, we saw a figure with the legs drawn up in front of the belly. The reason for these different postures has been explained by Rosenthal. The temperature of the body, as is well known, is kept up and regulated by the circulation of the blood through it, and a great proportion of the blood contained in the whole body circulates in the vessels of the intestines. Now the intestines are only separated from the external air by the thin abdominal walls, and therefore any change of

temperature in the atmosphere will readily act upon them unless they be guarded by some additional protection. The Hindoos are well aware of this, and they habitually protect the belly by means of a thick shawl or cummerbund, thus guarding themselves against any sudden change of temperature. This precaution is also frequently adopted by Europeans resident in hot climates, and is even retained by them after returning to England. But the function of the cummerbund may, to a certain extent, be fulfilled by change of posture alone. When the legs are drawn up, as in the picture of Winter already referred to, the thighs partially cover the abdomen, and taking the place of additional clothing, aid the abdominal walls in protecting the intestines and the blood they contain from the cooling influence of the external air.

Thus it is that in cold weather, when the quantity of covering in bed is insufficient, persons naturally draw up their legs towards the abdomen, so as to retain as much heat as possible before going to sleep. In hot weather, on the contrary, they wish to expose the abdomen as much as possible to the cooling influence of the atmosphere. The posture depicted by Alma Tadema is the most efficient for this purpose. It no doubt answers the purpose to lie down flat on one's back, but in this position the abdominal walls are more or less tight, whereas, when one of the legs is drawn up as in the painting just alluded to, the walls are relaxed, and the intestines not being subject to any pressure, the blood in them will circulate more rapidly, and the cooling process be carried on more effectually. In this attitude also the thighs are completely separated, and loss of heat allowed from their whole surface.

Varying conditions of fatigue also alter the postures which people assume. When slightly tired one is content to sit down in an ordinary chair in the position of the letter N with the middle limb horizontal. As we get more and more fatigued we usually assume positions in

which the limbs of the **N** become more and more oblique, the trunk leaning backwards and the legs extending forwards. If we lie down in bed on our back the legs will probably become straight, but if we rest upon our side they will be more or less bent. The straightness of the legs in the supine position is simply due to their weight, which is then supported at every point by the bed, but when we lie on our sides the genuflexion of the legs is most agreeable, because not only are the muscles more perfectly relaxed, but, as the late Prof. Goodsir pointed out, the bones which form the knee-joint are slightly removed one from another, and thus the joint itself, as well as the muscles, passes into a state of rest. Some of the bamboo easy chairs manufactured in India allow us to obtain the advantages of both positions. These chairs are made in the form of a somewhat irregular straggling **W**, and in them one can lie on one's back with every part of the body thoroughly supported, and the knees bent in the same way as they would be if one lay upon one's side.

Thus simple inaction, the relaxation of muscles, and the laxity of joints, are some of the factors necessary for complete rest, and an easy chair, to be perfect, must secure them all.

But it is possible for an easy chair to secure all these, and yet be imperfect. We have just said that usually, as the fatigue becomes greater and greater, the tendency is to assume the position of the **N** with the limbs at a more or less obtuse angle, but when sitting in an ordinary chair we find relief from raising the feet by means of a foot-stool, although this tends to make the angles of the **N** more acute instead of more obtuse. Still more relief, however, do we obtain when the legs are raised up on a level with the body by being placed upon another chair, or by being rested on the Indian bamboo seat already described. If, in addition to this, the legs are gently shampooed upwards, the sensation is perfectly delightful, and the feelings of

fatigue are greatly lessened. To understand how this can be, it is necessary for us to have some idea as to the cause of fatigue. Any muscular exertion can be performed for a considerable time by a man in average health, without the least feeling of fatigue, but by and by the muscles become weary, and do not respond to the will of their owner so rapidly as before ; and if the exertion be too great, or be continued for too long a time, they will ultimately entirely refuse to perform their functions. The muscle, like a steam-engine, derives the energy which it expends in mechanical work from the combustion going on within it, and this combustion, in both cases would come to a standstill if its waste products or ashes were not removed. It is these waste products of the muscle which, accumulating within it, cause fatigue, and ultimately paralyse it. This has been very neatly shown by Kronecker, who caused a frog's muscle, separated from the body, to contract until it entirely ceased to respond to a stimulus. He then washed out the waste products from it by means of a little salt and water, and found that its contractile power again returned, just as the power of the steam-engine would be increased by raking the ashes which were blocking up the furnace and putting out the fire. These waste products are partly removed from the muscles by the blood which flows through them, and are carried by the veins into the general circulation. There they undergo more complete combustion, and tend to keep up the temperature of the body. At the same time, however, according to Preyer, they lessen the activity of the nervous system, producing a tendency to sleep, and in this way he would, at least to some extent, explain the agreeable drowsiness which comes on after muscular exertion. It would seem, however, that the circulation of the blood is insufficient to remove all the waste products from the muscles, for we find that they are supplied with a special apparatus for this purpose. Each muscle is generally ensheathed in a thin membrane, or fascia, and

besides these we have thicker fasciæ ensheathing whole limbs. These fasciæ act as a pumping apparatus, by which the products of waste may be removed from the muscles which they invest. They consist of two layers, with spaces between. When the muscle is at rest these layers separate and the spaces become filled with fluid derived from the muscle, and when the muscle contracts it presses the two layers of its investing sheath together, and drives out the fluid contained between them. This passes onwards into the lymphatics, where a series of valves prevent its return, and allow it only to move onwards, till at last it is emptied into the general circulation.

In strong and healthy people the veins and lymphatics together are quite able to take up all the fluid which the arteries have supplied to the muscles, and thus prevent any accumulation from taking place either in them or in the cellular tissue adjoining them, or at least prevent any such accumulation as might become evident to the eye. In delicate, weakly persons, or in those who suffer from certain diseases of the vascular system, this is not the case; and after standing or walking for a long time the legs become swollen, so that the boots feel tight, and sometimes even a distinct impression may be remarked at that part of the ankle which was uncovered by the boot. In such persons we can actually see the swelling disappear after the feet have been kept rested for some time on a level with the body, and it may be removed more quickly still by gently and steadily rubbing the limbs in one direction from below upwards. It is almost certain that what we thus see in weakly persons occurs to a slighter extent in all, and that even in the most healthy person after a long walk a slight accumulation of fluid, laden with the products of muscular waste, occurs both in the muscles themselves, and in the cellular tissue around them, even although we cannot detect it by simple inspection. So long as the limbs of such a person hang down, the force of gravity retards the return both of blood through

the veins and of lymph through the fasciæ and lymphatics, and thus hinders the muscles from getting rid of those waste products which caused the fatigue. When the legs are raised, this hindrance is at once removed, both blood and lymph return more readily from the muscles, carrying with them those substances which had been formed by the muscles of the limbs during the exertions which they had undergone when carrying the body about. So long as these substances remained where they had been formed, they might cause in the muscles of the legs an undue amount of fatigue, although when distributed over the body generally, they may produce only a pleasing languor. When the legs are long, the obstruction to the return of blood and lymph is of course greater than when they are short, and this return will take place more readily when the legs are raised above the body than when they are only on a level with it. This may be one of the reasons why some of our long-legged American cousins are so fond of raising their feet to a level with their heads, or even higher, although it is very probable that there are reasons still more powerful, which we may discuss at a future time.

It has already been mentioned that the lymph is propelled along the interstices of the fasciæ into the lymphatic vessels by the intermittent pressure which the muscle exerts upon them from within, and it seems natural to suppose that the flow may also be aided by a pressure from without, in the form of shampooing. Even when the hand is rubbed backwards and forwards upon the leg it will relieve fatigue, but the relief is greater when the leg is firmly grasped and the hand moved gently upwards so as to drive onwards as much as possible any fluid which may have accumulated in the limb, and the grasp being then relaxed, the same process should be repeated.

But while the lymph is thus most readily removed by the pumping action of intermittent pressure either of the hand without or of the muscles alternately contracting and

relaxing within, it seems to us probable that this process may also be aided by steady, constant pressure from without. No doubt it is impossible for such a steady pressure to take the place of the regular pumping action produced by the alternate contraction and relaxation of the muscles when in action, yet it will have a somewhat similar action, though to a very much less extent. For at each beat of the heart, as Mosso shows, the entire limb is distended by the blood driven into the vessels, and during the pauses between the beats it again becomes smaller. Each pulse, therefore, by distending the whole limb and each individual muscle will press out a little of the fluid contained in the fasciæ in the same way as the contractions of the muscles themselves, and it seems to us probable that it is the aid which is afforded to this process by the gentle pressure exerted on the outside of the legs by a seat which supports them along their whole extent, that renders such a seat so peculiarly restful and agreeable. For an easy chair to be perfect, therefore, it ought not only to provide for complete relaxation of the muscles, for flexion and consequent laxity of the joints, but also for the easy return of blood and lymph not merely by the posture of the limbs themselves, but by equable support and pressure against as great a surface of the limbs as possible.

Such are the theoretical demands, and it is interesting to notice how they are all fulfilled by the afore-mentioned chair in the shape of a straggling **W**, which the languor consequent upon a relaxing climate has taught the natives of India to make, and which is known all over the world.

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IN a former paper¹ I observed that I thought medicine lost a great deal by its practitioners either not recording their experience at all, or not recording it in such a form as to be readily available for their fellow practitioners, or with sufficient precision to be really useful. As examples of vagueness and precision I instanced a verbal description of a face as commonly given, and a sketch containing all the features more or less precisely drawn. In the present paper I have tried in a very imperfect way to indicate the common postures which one meets with daily, either in patients or others, and

FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



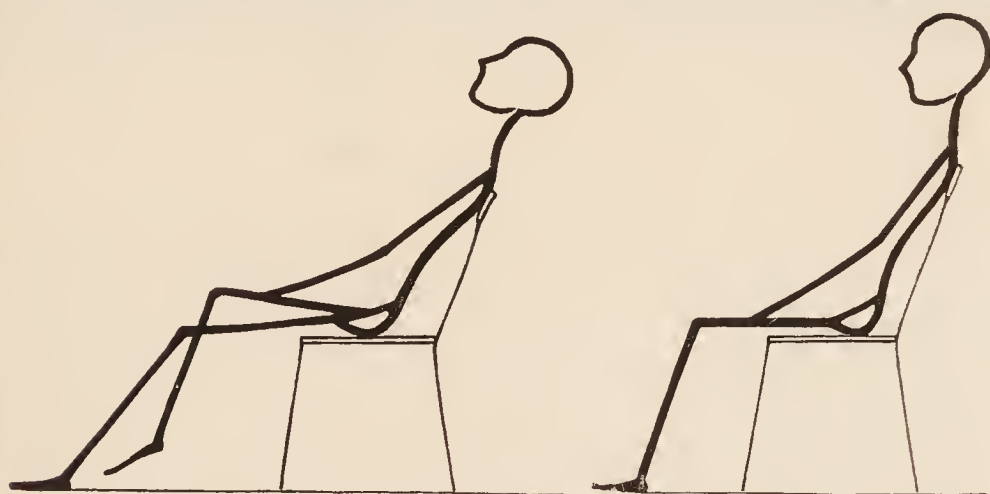
to discover the reason why those postures are assumed. I have not attempted to draw the figures, for this would have been beyond my powers, and probably also beyond the powers of many medical men. I have simply indicated the position

¹ On the Method of Zadig in Medicine, THE LANCET, Jan. 2nd, 1892.

by a few simple lines such as anyone can draw. This method is one which was employed with great success by the late Professor Goodsir more than thirty years ago in illustrating his lectures on anatomy. In a few lines he conveyed the impression of the agility of the cat as compared with the heavy movements of the ox or of the elephant, and the absence of detail fixed the minds of his students all the more firmly on the main facts which he wished them to carry away. As we walk along the streets and notice the difference of attitude in the passers-by,

FIG. 3.

FIG. 4.



some with head erect and agile steps convey to us at once the idea of energy and activity (Fig. 1), while others with hanging heads and bended knees suggest the ideas of languor, weakness and depression (Fig. 2). It is a matter of ancient observation that such an attitude as this is associated with weak circulation, and it is probably more than three thousand years ago that the injunction was given: "Strengthen ye the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees; say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not." Is. xxxv., 3, 4.² When the heart is stimulated by joy or hope the attitude again becomes erect and the gait brisk and elastic. It is by no means easy to distinguish exactly between the part played in this change by the motor cells of the nerve centres and by the circulatory apparatus, for the activity of the motor

² Also, "Lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet." Heb. xii., 12.

cells on which muscular action depends is itself influenced to an enormous extent by the circulation of blood through the nerve centres. We find an example of this in the

FIG. 5.



FIG. 6.



attitude unconsciously assumed by anyone engaged in conversation or argument. So long as he takes only a listless interest in the subject under discussion he may lie back in the chair with his legs crossed and his arms either hanging down or his hands laid loosely in his lap (Fig. 3). As his interest increases his attitude becomes more erect (Fig. 4), and he sits straight up with his hands folded or laid upon his knees instead of hanging listlessly down (Fig. 5). As the interest

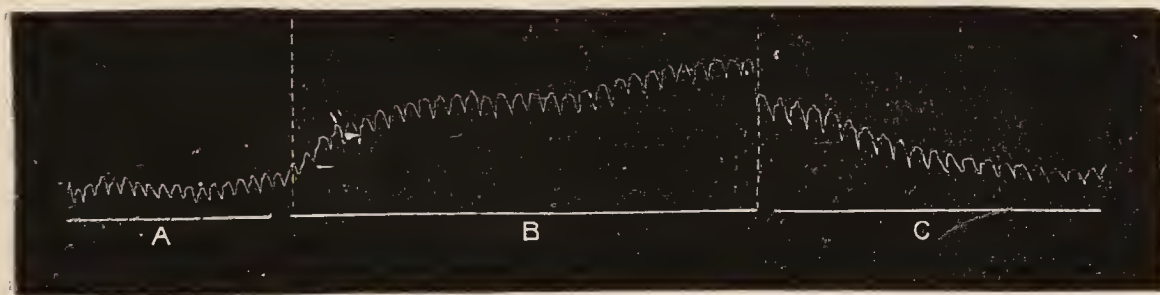
FIG. 7.



increases still further the body is bent forwards at an angle and the hand is very probably placed firmly on the thigh (Fig. 6). If he becomes excited in the heat of argument the body is bent forwards at a somewhat acute angle and the hand is stretched out in front and somewhat upwards as if to help the

words which flow from his lips to drive the thoughts which are rapidly evolved from his brain into his opponent's mind. (Fig. 7.) In this position the flow of blood through the arterial system onwards to the brain as well as its return backwards through the veins seems to be particularly easy (Fig. 8).

FIG. 8.



Tracing from the brain. A, in upright position ; B, with head inclined forwards.

This position is not only assumed during the heat of argument, whether the speaker be sitting or standing, but when one is led to assume it unconsciously it seems to give rise to a rapid and sometimes almost uncontrollable flow of ideas. Thus it occasionally becomes a cause of remorse to devout souls, who during the attempt to pray in church in this attitude are sadly distracted by crowds of ideas which at once disappear on the assumption of an easy sitting posture. The circulation in the cerebral vessels and the current of ideas in the brain are very delicate things and may be modified by very slight causes ; thus an attitude with the head drooping slightly more than that indicated in Fig. 6, and with the chin supported upon the hand is the one frequently assumed in deep thought, with concentration of ideas upon a single subject and no desire for immediate expression (Fig. 9). The touch of the hand upon the head seems to have a directing power over the thoughts which one would formerly have been inclined to deny, but such experiments as those of Tesla and Crookes with electric currents of very high tension give a visible illustration of phenomena previously unknown and seemingly incredible. For in these experiments a person who has put himself into the electric field renders vacuum tubes containing various substances fluorescent

and fills them with a glow of coloured light by simply waving his hands over them. The tubes, which were previously dark, owe their luminosity only to the approximation of his hand, yet he himself does not feel that any special power has gone out of him. The contact of the hand with the temples seems as if it could hardly by any possibility modify the circulation in the brain or the feelings of the individual, and yet it appears to have an actually soothing effect and to be a real physical solace in cases of grief and depression (Fig. 10). At the same

FIG. 9.



FIG. 10.



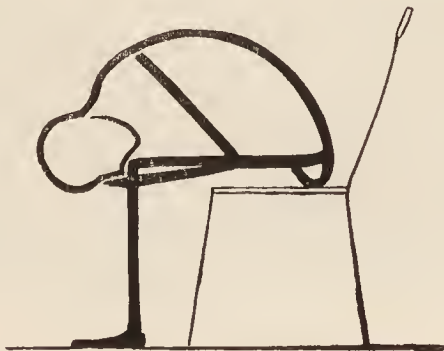
time the greater droop of the head possibly provides for a better supply of blood to the sensory parts of the brain in the posterior part of the head and thus to a certain extent counteracts the general weakness of the circulation. In the case of excitement (Fig. 7), the head being more raised, if a straight line were drawn through the axis of the body so as to represent the line of the aorta and carotid arteries, it would come out at the anterior part of the head; and blood driven onwards in this line would supply nutriment rather to the motor than to the sensory centres.

In cases where the circulation is exceedingly weak and syncope is threatened, a most useful plan is to make the patient put his head down between his knees (Fig. 11), so that an ample supply of blood shall reach the cerebral centres. Long ago, before the introduction of anæsthetics, a common plan of rendering patients senseless previously to the performance of an operation was to lay the patient flat upon his back and then suddenly hoist him to a standing posture by six strong men who held him by the arms, three

on one side and three on the other. The brain being thus, as it were lifted away from the blood, became so anæmic that it ceased to act before the circulation could adapt itself to the new posture.

An experience of my own once showed me how very dependent the brain is upon the supply of blood. I was called upon one night after a long day's work to write an article immediately. I sat down with pen, ink and paper before me, but not a single idea came into my head, not a single word could I write. Lying back I solilo-

FIG. 11

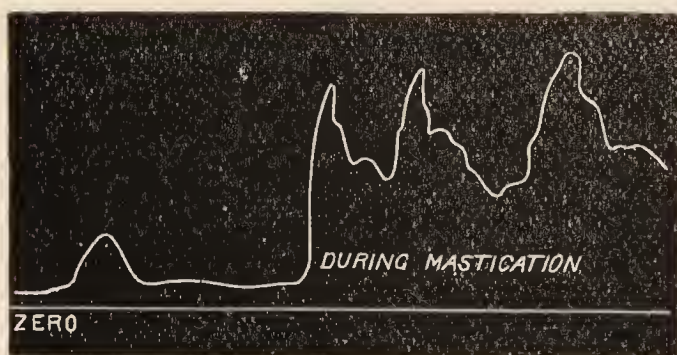


quised: "The brain is the same as it was yesterday and it worked then, why will it not work to-day?" Then it occurred to me that the day before I was not so tired and probably the circulation was a little brisker than to-day. I next thought of the various experiments on the connexion between cerebral circulation and mental activity and I concluded that if the blood would not come to the brain the best thing would be to bring the brain down to the blood. I laid my head flat upon the table and at once my ideas began to flow and my pen began to run across the paper. I thought "I am getting on so well I may sit up now," but the moment I raised the head my mind became an utter blank, so I put my head down again flat upon the table and finished my article in that position.

Stimulation of some branch or other of the fifth nerve seems to increase the circulation in the brain and those who are making their utmost calls upon their mental powers are accustomed to stimulate this nerve in one way or another. The late Lord Derby used to eat brandied cherries, and an

experiment of Marey's (Fig. 12) proves that mastication will accelerate the flow of blood through the carotid artery, and serves to show the wisdom of an editor whom I knew who used to eat figs while writing a leading article and even of those who indulge in the practice so disagreeable to their neighbours of chewing tobacco. Others stimulate the gustatory branches of the fifth nerve by the sweets which they suck or by the smoke of a cigar or cigarette ; while a rustic called upon suddenly to answer a question will probably

FIG. 12.



Tracing of the rate of circulation in the carotid. After Marey.

excite the cutaneous branches of this nerve by scratching his head, and a man of more culture may stroke his moustache or beard, press his forehead or eyes, or, like many Germans, smite his nose with the forefinger.

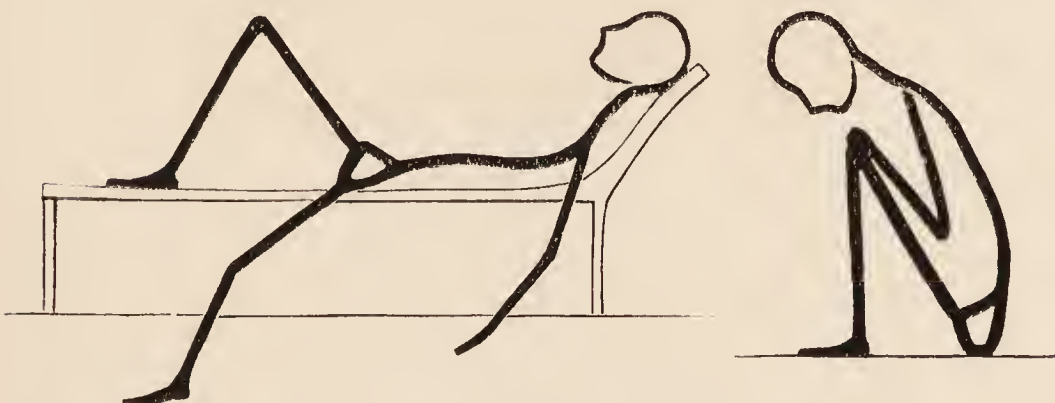
A similar reason may be given to explain the habit of snuffing formerly so much in vogue. The gentle titillation of the nasal mucous membrane by the snuff probably serves to stimulate the cerebral circulation and the increased arterial tension due to the efforts of sneezing so increases the cerebral nutrition that difficulties seem at once to disappear and obscurities of mental vision are so rapidly removed that snuff is said in popular language to "clear the head." The practice of snuffing has fallen to a great extent into disuse, but it may still be occasionally employed with advantage in cases of severe and persistent headache where other remedies fail to relieve. Even where such a strong irritant as snuff is not resorted to, smelling salts (sal volatile) or aromatic vinegar may give considerable relief in headache if frequently inhaled.

While stimulation of the fifth nerve as just described tends to keep people awake and increase their mental activity, gentle, rhythmical stroking of the head tends, on the contrary, to make them fall asleep, and brushing the hair has this effect on many people to such an extent that the movements of the hairdresser's fingers over the scalp and rhythmical click of the shears will send some people to sleep, even at the risk of having their hair shorn to a much greater extent than would be at all pleasing to them on awakening. A gentle rubbing of the scalp, as if to loosen it upon the skull, also tends not only to sooth irritability, but to relieve and to prevent headaches.

External temperature has a powerful effect in determining posture. On a hot summer's day the natural ten-

FIG. 13.

FIG. 14.



dency is to lie down with the head slightly raised, the arms hanging loose and one leg extended, while the other perhaps is drawn up, as in Fig. 13. The physiological reason for this posture is that in it the greatest extent of cooling is attained, for it ensures the greatest possible exposure of the largest vascular district in the body—viz., the intestinal vessels—to the cooling influence of the external air. This is aided by the loss of heat due to the evaporation of sweat. By the slight raising of the head and the drawing up of one leg the abdominal parietes are rendered loose and the intestines tend to fall sideways and the abdomen tends to become flattened from before backwards. The greatest extent of cooling surface is thus obtained and the temperature of the body is kept as low as possible.

An entirely opposite attitude is assumed when the external air is cold (Fig. 14). The thin abdominal walls being in-

sufficient to protect the intestinal vessels from the cooling influence of the external air, the legs are drawn up until the thick muscles of the thigh form a warm covering to the abdomen and thus prevent loss of heat from the intestinal vessels. Many people are unable to get to sleep when they are at all cold, and Rosenthal has shown that this attitude is commonly adopted by men, dogs and other animals when preparing to sleep so as not only to maintain the bodily temperature during sleep, but to allow the intestinal vessels to dilate and accommodate a mass of blood which would otherwise be driven into the cerebral circulation, stimulating it to functional activity and keeping the person or animal awake.

FIG. 15.

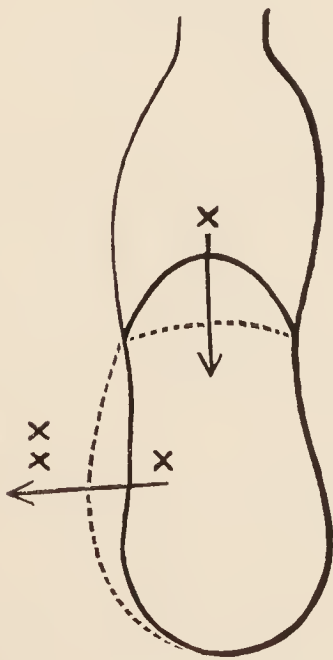


The attitude of the body may be altered permanently by occupation or disease in such a way that one accustomed to pay attention to this subject can frequently make out with a little trouble a good deal regarding the patient's history and illnesses. Thus a chronic cough has the effect of inflating the chest and rounding the back, so that one might almost guess from the figure (15) that the person so shaped was liable to chronic bronchitis. The more tightly a bladder is blown up with air the more tense does it become and the more does it take a circular form. In the same way the more an alveolus of the lung is blown up by the efforts of coughing the more does it resemble the inflated bladder. What is true of a single alveolus is true of the chest as a whole. It tends as nearly as possible to become globular, with

a circular outline not only in the transverse, but in the longitudinal direction. The sternum and vertebræ prevent it from becoming completely globular, notwithstanding all efforts, and it thus assumes the barrel shape so characteristic of emphysema, as being the nearest possible approach to a globe. In going through a hospital ward one sees here and there patients who are constantly sitting up in bed and do not lie down at all ; these are for the most part people who have great difficulty of breathing. The reason for this position has no doubt been often given, but I do not recollect coming across it in print and I cannot say whether the reason that I now give has been evolved from my own brain or whether I have learned it from others.

When a man is sitting upright the diaphragm moves up and down during respiration. (Fig. 16.) At each inspiration it descends and displaces the intestines and the abdominal walls

FIG. 16.

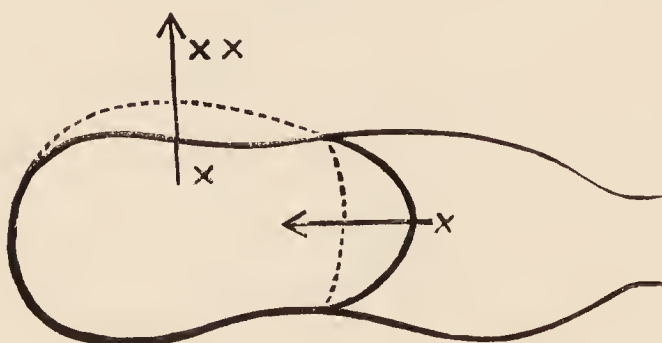


outwards. During each expiration the diaphragm ascends and the intestines and abdominal wall return back to their former position. In the upright posture the diaphragm moves vertically, but the abdominal walls and intestines move in a horizontal plane and there is no lifting work for the diaphragm to do. The case is quite different when a man is lying on his back, for then the diaphragm moves in a horizontal plane and the abdominal walls and intestines in a

vertical one. During inspiration as the diaphragm encroaches on the abdomen for the purpose of enlarging the thorax (Fig. 17) it has actually to raise the intestines and the abdominal walls instead of merely moving them in a horizontal plane. As the diaphragm returns into the thorax during inspiration its progress will be accelerated by the weight of the descending intestines, and thus the recumbent posture may be sometimes useful in cases of bronchitis with emphysema, and so such cases may be seen sometimes lying down although there is considerable interference with the aeration of the blood. In cases of cardiac disease no benefit of this kind is obtained, and therefore we find that a large proportion of those whom we see sitting upright in bed in a hospital ward are suffering from disease of the heart.

When a patient lies upon his side the intestines also move in a horizontal plane, and this is the position usually assumed during healthy sleep, for in it there is no inter-

FIG. 17.



ference with expiration any more than when the patient is sitting upright, while at the same time the rest obtained is much more complete. The side upon which one lies is immaterial to most healthy persons and they frequently lie first upon one and then on another, turning over perhaps several times in the course of the night; but in cardiac disease or cardiac irritability without organic disease patients frequently are unable to lie upon the left side because the heart beats against the ribs with such force as to cause physical discomfort. At the same time the heart itself appears to be stimulated by the blows which it gives itself against the thoracic walls and to palpitate more violently than before. The patient is therefore obliged to

lie upon the right side. A similar result may occur if the liver is enlarged or congested, for then it seems to drag upon the suspensory ligaments when the patient lies upon the left side and thus he is obliged to turn round that the liver may be supported by the ribs. If a heavy meal has been taken shortly before retiring to rest the person may be unable to lie upon his left side because the stomach drags upon its pyloric end. On the other hand, if the stomach is distended by flatulence the gases sometimes will not escape while the patient is lying on his left side and he must either be raised into the sitting posture or be turned on his left side to allow the gas to eructate by the œsophagus and the tension in the stomach to be relieved,² for the œsophagus joins the stomach at such an angle that when the patient is on his left side the gases appear to accumulate and not to find an exit through the œsophagus, but when he is on his right side they pass upwards with comparative ease. This of course is a matter of very slight moment to patients who are able to move readily, because they adjust their own position at will and soon find out which is the most easy one for them. But when a patient is so weak that he is unable to move himself he is frequently allowed to lie flat on his back and to suffer much from abdominal distension and even from difficulty of breathing, due to the diaphragm being pushed upwards when he might be relieved by simply sitting him up for a few minutes or turning him over on his left side.

In this short paper I have made no reference to many other postures in disease, neither have I attempted to discuss the postures due to trade, nor have I attempted to make the paper complete. I have merely tried to give an illustration of an easy method of recording posture in a tolerably precise and easily understood way and have attempted to connect external signs with physiological conditions as an illustration of the method of tracking which I mentioned in a former paper in the hope of inducing others to prosecute the same line of work.

² I have found this practice useful. The explanation I have given of its utility was, I think, suggested to me several years ago by John Haddon, M.A., M.D.

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